

IRRIGATED AGRICULTURE ISSUES FOCUS OF MEETING ON MONTANA-ALBERTA TIE LINE

By Rick Swigart, The Lethbridge Herald

LETHBRIDGE, Alberta — Irrigated agriculture was the primary focus of the second day of the Energy Utility Board's public hearing here on a permit for the proposed \$129 million Montana-Alberta Tie Line electrical transmission project.

Lethbridge lawyer Tom MacLachlan spent the entire day — and will reappear first thing Monday when the hearing resumes — hammering on the finite details of how MATL will accommodate irrigation farmers.

He closed the day by attempting to revisit the National Energy Board application process followed by MATL when the corridors for the transmission line's potential routes were being defined.

MacLachlan suggested there was nothing in MATL's submission to the EUB that outlined any differentiation between irrigated land and other agricultural lands when developing the preferred corridor, and consequently, the preferred transmission route.

Explanations from Bob Williams, MATL vice president of regulation, and Gary Ford, senior environmental consultant instrumental in the public consultation process, failed to satisfy MacLachlan.

John Railton, MATL senior regulation adviser, said all three proposed corridors were ultimately identified with the use of federal Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration maps that include topography and plant mix identifications.

He also admitted that the same detailed information that sparked selection of the preferred corridor east of Coaldale was not applied to the two alternate corridors.

Railton said it became virtually impossible to choose a western route from north of Lethbridge for the approximately 80-mile transmission line to the U.S. border. That forced the company to select a route to the east and then south — with the least possible impact on landowners.

Railton said that once the eastern route was chosen, defining that route amounted to choosing which irrigating producers would be impacted, depending on the route within 1.25-mile-wide corridor.

The company did not produce the same detailed information for the alternative routes.

MATL landowner contact specialist Greg Weakick of Lethbridge said the fewest number of residences were affected by the preferred route, but that that study did not consider the irrigation component.

In the preferred route, 34 houses are within 1,300 feet of the line and 56 are within 2,600 feet. In the Alternative C route, 56 houses are within 1,300 feet and 91 within 2,600 feet. In the Berrian route, 54 houses are within 1,300 feet and 127 are within 2,600 feet.

MacLachlan, who represents several landowners opposing the proposed location of the line, spent considerable time Thursday trying to secure detailed information on how MATL could build the transmission line with the least impact on irrigation.

Williams said MATL has detailed information on some individual irrigation farm operations, and, pending EUB approval of its application to build the line, will complete a detailed construction plan.

He said MATL is prepared to "thread the needle" in building the 240-kilovolt line on right-of-way between irrigated parcels.

MacLachlan questioned the position of the transmission line close to irrigation sprinklers. Some studies indicated that no irrigation effluent, especially those containing liquid fertilizer, should come in contact with the steel transmission towers or poles.

Ford said MATL is prepared to ensure transmission towers in the vicinity of irrigation equipment are tall enough to put the electrical components out of reach of the water.

Working with a series of photographs that showed end-gun sprinkler units or corner arm units that allow a center pivot to cover more land, MATL officials said they are prepared to alter the normal 520-foot span between power poles to fit the irrigation pipe and end gun between poles, eliminating any potential contact with water.

Another issue brought up by MacLachlan was the interference of normal maintenance work by farmers when the transmission line is close to canals or pump sites.

He said the transmission line will limit the operation of some equipment with a long reach since they might not be able to safely operate under the power lines.

Williams said MATL will mitigate such conditions when possible, and offer compensation if landowners are forced to make changes.

He said the same consideration would be provided to irrigation farmers if the operation of a center pivot can't be accommodated.

The company is prepared to pay to shorten a sprinkler or move the center pivot point if it helps accommodate the power line.

Railton said one problem faced by the company was that landowners were opposed to even discussing the project.

MacLachlan countered that he never requested his clients remain silent.